

Oral History Cover Sheet

“GREEN” 1970 CONSERVATION IN ACTION
JAY HAMERNICK OUTDOOR PLANNER
US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

[Recording of a radio broadcast]

Brief Summary of Interview: In this radio broadcast, Jay Hamernick, Recreation Specialist for the Upper Mississippi Refuge, discusses the main winter activities on the refuge including: ice fishing, skiing, snow shoeing, ice skating, observing wintering birds, and snowmobiling. He discusses the precautions one should take using snowmobiles and the maintenance of them. He also discusses the hazards of going out on frozen rivers, lakes, and other bodies of water suggesting that common sense and good judgment should be used if crossing the frozen ice.

“GREEN” 1970 CONSERVATION IN ACTION
JAY HAMERNICK OUTDOOR PLANNER
US FISH AND WILDLIFE SERVICE

[Recording of a radio broadcast]

KEN: ...the season when our recreational activities in the out of doors turn from traditional picnicking and boating and hunting to some of the out door sports like ice fishing and skiing, snowmobiling and attendance at winter carnivals of which the cold and snow are really a part. Now, we turn our attention to other activities such as basketball games, and hockey games. In fact we might call this period of the year an “in between time” which has it’s own special entertainment features, for those who like either indoor or outdoor sports. Deep snow and thick ice are no barriers to the enjoyment of the outdoor enthusiast at this time of year. Let’s start out our 1970 Conservation in Action Program with a discussion of winter activities, which are open to our people here in the Upper Mississippi valley. And here to discuss this with me is Jay Hamerwick, Recreation Specialist of the Upper Mississippi Refuge staff who is involved in the study of needs and problems of the outdoor recreational world. First of all Jay, let’s discuss some of the main winter activities or sports that are available here on the Refuge and in the river valley locality during this season. What are some of them?

MR. HAMERNICK: Ken, I believe that the number one winter outdoor sport in this area is probably ice fishing. As you know, this is an excellent time of year for fishing, particularly for pan fish. And we have many, many thousands of people that do come to the river for this activity. So that during the winter months, once the ice is frozen solid, why, this is perhaps the number one activity on the river. There are a number of other sports that are rapidly increasing in popularity. We are seeing more and more of the ski slopes and tows coming into existence on the bluffs along the river. They are even able to extend the season on some of these areas with the production of artificial snow. We have some of the traditional sports such as ice-skating. We are seeing some other relatively new things in this area; cross-country skiing, and snow shoeing would be another possibility. So there are quite a few of these sports that are available at this time of year for those who enjoy getting out when it’s cold, and enjoy seeing the snow. We have some of our activities from the rest of the year that are even popular now. I am thinking primarily now of our bird watching. We have many new species that are present here during the winter months that will not be seen in this vicinity during the summer. We have a good opportunity to observe our winter birds at close hand because natural

foods are largely inaccessible to birds now. They come readily to feeders, and many people enjoy putting out their feeders during the winter months to see a variety of birds in their own yards right up close.

KEN: So, in other words the advent of winter is no reason to stop our enjoyment of the out of doors world, is it?

MR. HAMERNICK: Not in the least.

KEN: Jay, let's discuss some of the presently popular winter sports. The advent of these remarkable little vehicles, the snowmobiles. The growth of these has literally mushroomed. And they are literally very maneuverable little machine, which can literally go many places that you can't with conventional vehicles. Let's discuss some of the operation of these machines. And also in the interest of people conservation; some of the things that should be avoided and accidents that can happen, so that they can enjoy this sport to the fullest without some of these tragic happenings.

MR. HAMERNICK: This indeed a fast growing sport in the country that has snow. The machines are relatively new, yet we are seeing several hundred thousand of them. In Minnesota and Wisconsin they are experiencing the same type of thing. They offer tremendous possibilities for the winter period. People are able to get back into country that they were not able to get into at other times of the year. People can go much further than they were able to go on foot, so they have some real advantages. They are a machine that is, let's say fun, or exciting to operate. Compared to certain other forms of recreation, why, either through renting or purchasing one the sport is not overly expensive so it's something that is available to a broad class of our population. But it's a tremendous winter sport. And it is one that is growing very rapidly.

KEN: Now, in connection with the use of these remarkable new snow machines, there are a few precautions, which should be observed. I'd like to ask you about a few of them. What about leaving these machines, or getting off of them when they are moving? There is hazard there too, just like getting out of a moving automobile isn't there?

MR. HAMERNICK: That's right Ken. I think that this is a very good point to make. These are very similar to an automobile in certain respects. I think that because the machines are so new, and because they have come so quickly, and because they are relatively simple to start and set in motion, we find that anyone, even small children are able to get on one of these and set it in motion. This is where your real hazard comes in. People who are not familiar with the machine and with what the machine can do, and with what it cannot do, can be inviting disaster for themselves. I imagine that many of our listeners will recall the demise of an entire family on a Minnesota lake last year. I think that here along the river, this is perhaps our greatest hazard. The machines are light relatively speaking, and perhaps people are willing to take chances with them on ice that they might not take with a vehicle that would be much heavier. So there are things like this that the operators must become familiar with before they really venture out on these machines.

KEN: In other words, the experienced drivers of these machines should train the youngsters who are coming up and learning to drive them, or other drivers who want to know how to handle them safely?

MR. HAMERNICK: Right. And I think it would be a good idea to learn to handle these, let's say, more in your own back yard to begin with, where you have relatively level terrain. And you should start out operating the machines at slower speeds and so on, just until the machine becomes familiar to the operator. Then you can really head out into the wide-open country and into areas where you are further away from help if something should go wrong with the machine.

KEN: What are some of the other common precautions that should be observed in operating these small snowmobiles that are coming out on the market in such numbers?

MR. HAMERNICK: Well, there are a number of hazards in snowmobile operations that we probably should note. I have here a list of major ones that have been pointed up as a result of interviews with victims. Perhaps some people feel that this might be placing an undue emphasis on the negative side. Yet, I feel that we do owe our listeners something here, in placing them in a position where they are aware of the possibilities. During the past winter, fifty-one people died as a result of using snowmobiles. The accident causes break down in frequency like this; the number one was drowning from venturing out on thin ice. Then there are three categories of collisions with other vehicles, either snowmobiles or automobiles: then, collisions with fixed objects, and surprisingly enough and often enough to deserve a category all by itself; collisions with trains. So there are your major sources of accidents with snowmobiles. Now, we can just mention some of the hazards. Some of them we referred to: the lack of experience, and the same as with a car; operating at too high a speed. One that is very prevalent and that is quite serious is the jumps. This is the most prevalent cause of broken backs. I think we see a great deal of this being done in advertising by the snowmobile industry. It looks exciting. It looks easy. And yet, for an inexperienced operator, it is a real risk to his back. The same as with a car; alcohol can be a real problem in operating these machines. They are somewhat unstable on steep slopes or on rugged country. A person who is not in control of himself is going to have difficulty controlling the machine and he is inviting real hazard here. Running across country as people generally do with these machines, barbed wire presents a real hazard for them. This is related to their speed and also to lack of visibility. Often times we find that the drivers of these snowmobiles will over drive their headlights, the same as the operator of an automobile will do. Here again is the responsibility of the driver to know how fast he can safely go and still be within range of his headlight. These are a number of hazards that have been determined as a result of actual interviews with people who have had some unfortunate accidents.

KEN: What are some recommendations, Jay, on the precautions to take in the operations of these machines to avoid some of these incidents that you have mentioned? How about visibility for instance? Is that a factor in operating these small snow travel machines?

MR. HAMERNICK: Yes, it is Ken. And one of the things that all of the experts seem to agree on is that ski goggles, with interchangeable colored glasses are a must. Tinting of windshields does not seem to be affective for all conditions. To make your own machine visible to other machines some of suggested a flag, or a ball on an antenna. These machines have a low silhouette. And something like this that would stand up vertical would help in enabling the machine to be seen more easily. Night driving is not especially recommended on these machines. But sometimes it is necessary to do so. Good lights are a must and the addition of reflective tape on the sides and rear will serve much the same purpose that your backup or tail lights on an automobile serve.

KEN: What are some of the other precautions? How about maintenance on these machines? That's important, like on a car.

MR. HAMERNICK: Yes, it is. Owners must become educated to this aspect of owning a machine. Manufacturers feel that the manuals are seldom read. Thus, a lengthy discussion in them on maintenance is useless. A person who has one of these machines, that is, a person who has purchased one should see their dealer for information on maintaining it. Those who are renting them should at least talk with the individuals from whom they rent them to see what maintenance or precaution in operation might be necessary.

KEN: Well, it's the wise use of anything, rather than the abuse of something that results in problems. You mentioned fences being a hazard to driving the snowmobiles across the county. Certainly, that's also a problem in keeping the good will of the landowners, property owners, and farmers and others who have to maintain fences. If they find them cut or damaged by running a machine through them, why, that's not going to make them happy or course and will inevitably lead to restrictions.

MR. HAMERNICK: I think we have an opportunity here Ken, with a sport that is new, and newly developing, for the snowmobilers themselves to develop a set of ethics for the operation of these machines. I don't think it should be necessary for the public agencies to have to step in and have to legislate, and to set regulations that are going to restrict and hinder these people. We realize in any sport that there are always a few who spoil it for the others, or spoil it for the majority. I think that as snowmobilers themselves get together and become aware of the problems in operating these machines and take it upon themselves to operate them in a safe and courteous manner respecting the rights of landowners and others. I think we have here a sport that offers tremendous opportunity for public enjoyment without necessarily being harmful to the interests of others.

KEN: They can be a wonderful asset in such things as simply looking up wildlife out in the territory; getting photographs, and simply watching birds and mammals. They can also raise problems with unlawful pursuit of animals. I think that there is legislation against that in most of the states at present. Speaking of hazards of operation equipment in winter conditions, another factor that interests me is this driving of cars out onto the ice. Now, there is now law against it to our knowledge, except the law of common sense and safety. What do you think of the practice of driving cars out there? Should they do

any exploratory driving, or should they stay on the main traveled path where someone else has beaten the way in?

MR. HAMERNICK: Well, I think that if you are going to go out on the ice, obviously go in areas that have already been traveled. However, I would sum up my personal feelings on this Ken this way; here on the Wildlife Refuge where we operate public property, we have a rule, we *never* take one of our vehicles out on the ice. I suppose this might sound like an extreme position. But particularly because we are dealing with property that the taxpayer has to purchase, it simply is not worth taking a foolish chance. I think that possibly this might be a good rule for the individual. It would do a person good, possibly to get out, and to walk a little bit, perhaps on snowshoes or maybe on skis. But on a river such as the upper Mississippi, why, I think it's very seldom that you can be certain that the ice is safe. I recall being with our District Manager down at Cassville, just a short time ago. At a very popular ice fishing area down there, cars drive out a good mile or perhaps more to reach it. However, Gene was pointing out that the area that they have to cross will very often be frozen solid when they go out in the morning and if they spend the day and come back in later that afternoon, they find open running water. The currents in the river, even in some of these back sloughs are not dependable. This is a real hazard that people should become aware of. I am sure all of us see, almost every winter at least one or two cars being fished out of the river. It's a terrible inconvenience if not an outright loss of life.

KEN: In connection with driving automobiles out onto the ice, I recall an incident in northwestern Minnesota when two fellows drove out to the middle of a lake which had a maximum depth of about fifteen or twenty feet in the center. They went through the ice. They kept their presence of mind sufficiently to get out of the place where they had broken through, and they were two very frightened people. But they did get out successfully and they retrieved the car. But as you say, on the river with the unpredictable action of the current under the ice you never know what the condition of the ice may be, even in a period of a few hours.

MR. HAMERNICK: That's right Ken, and as you mentioned these fellows in this lake were able to get out of the vehicle and come back up where they had gone through. However, in a river situation the current may very well move you down stream to the point where you are not able to come back up. So even in a situation where you might have the time, or the water might not be too deep for you to get back out, on the river you might not be able, because of the current, to reach the hole.

KEN: The problem of driving out on the ice of course is up to the individual. But we do urge at least, that you do say on the beaten paths, which have more opportunity to freeze more solidly, and exercise every care while you are out there. Is there any other final advice on 'people conservation' we might call it, to avoid some of the winter accidents while out ice fishing and in other pursuits?

MR. HAMERNICK: I think Ken, as you suggested a moment ago, the law of common sense. If people simply would think about what they are doing, if they would adequately

prepare themselves before they go out, and use good judgment when they are out on the ice and use plenty of caution. I think they have the opportunity for a tremendous amount of enjoyment and at the same time, not to fear some tragedy that would very well spoil the thing that they particularly enjoy doing.

KEN: I believe that our time is nearing an end. We've been interviewing Jay Hamerwick of the Upper Mississippi Refuge staff, on the winter sports: the ice fishing, the operation of snowmobiles and related pursuits in the outdoors at this time of year. Until next week at this time, good-bye for Conservation in Action.